



The Androscoggin River weaves its way for fifty miles along New Hampshire's northern border with Maine and has largely defined the communities along its banks. Perhaps the northern forest's most significant yet least known river, in New Hampshire alone, the Androscoggin River has ten hydroelectric dams, making it one of the most regulated rivers in New England. The river's most dramatic and powerful drop in elevation (nearly three hundred feet) begins at the first dam within the City of Berlin and ends at the Cascade Dam two miles downstream. In 1859, Thomas Starr King, a chronicler of the White Mountains, characterized this stretch of the river as "the most powerful cataract of the mountain region." For centuries man has discovered and rediscovered this region, from the Paleo-Indians who mined rhyolite in the Jasper Caves in Berlin to make tools (of which the mine is the only prehistoric archeological site on the National Register of Historic Places in the United States) to the industrialists who harnessed the river's power for manufacturing.

Situated on the pitch of the Androscoggin River, Berlin became the center of the pulp and papermaking industry in New England. Chartered in 1829, Berlin saw little economic activity apart from a few small farms for several decades. By 1850, however, three developments had changed the economic landscape of the Androscoggin Valley. The first was the introduction of the turbine engine that, when integrated into dams in the river, could generate power for mills. The second was the coming of the railroad to Berlin in 1852. The third factor was the availability of a new immigrant population in the United States ready and willing to relocate for the promise of employment.

In 1852 a group of Portland, Maine businessmen, John B. Brown, Josiah S. Little, Nathan Winslow and Hezekiah Winslow, recognized that the construction of a railroad line through Berlin, coupled with the availability of the new turbine technology, made the Androscoggin River Valley an ideal place in which to locate a highly-productive sawmill. They formed a partnership under the name H. Winslow and Company, which changed its name to Berlin Mills Company in 1868. That same year John Brown sold his stock to William Wentworth (W. W.) Brown (no relation) of Portland, Maine. In the 1880s W. W. Brown, along with other family members, purchased the remaining stock and acquired complete control of the Berlin Mills Company. W. W. Brown rapidly expanded and diversified the production facilities over the next twenty years, building chemical, pulp, and papermaking mills.

Other industrialists also took advantage of the technological, transportation and immigration factors. In 1877 H. H. Furbish established Forest Fiber Co., the first chemical pulp mill in Berlin, which he operated until the 1890s. Furbish then turned his interests to the production of electricity for the area with the mill's hydroelectric dam. In 1885 the owners of the Boston Globe and the New York Tribune built Glen Manufacturing Company, Berlin's first paper mill designed to produce newsprint, which they sold to International Paper Company in 1898.

By the early twentieth century Berlin Mills Company, which during World War I changed its name to Brown Company, had become the most prominent pulp and papermaking operation in Berlin and a leader in the pulp and papermaking industry nationally. In 1915, under the supervision of Hugh K. Moore, Brown Company built a separate research and development facility, the first in the industry. During the 1920s the Brown Company Research and Development Department employed more than 100 scientists and technicians, and it produced hundreds of patents. By 1929 Brown Company owned mills from Canada to Florida, employed more than 9,000 men and had assets exceeding \$75 million. The Berlin Centennial publication noted that "between 4,000 and 5,000 men [were] needed each winter to supply the mills with 400 thousand cords of wood used every year by the mills."

The arrival of the railroad in 1853 had dramatically and permanently transformed the cultural landscape of the region. Over the next

seventy-five years the population increased precipitously, peaking in 1930 at 20,018. According to the 1930 United States Census eighty percent of Berlin's inhabitants were immigrants or children of immigrants and fifty-seven percent were of French- Canadian heritage. The people who arrived to work in the mills and the ancillary businesses brought with them their particular ethnic identity. Initially this divided the various immigrant groups, who chose to live in neighborhoods with others of like background, creating ethnic communities. Over time, however, the remoteness of the Northern Forest, combined with its long, harsh winters, resulted in a partial coalescing and blending of these immigrant groups, forging a new cultural identity unique to the region.

By 1929 Berlin had reached its social, economic, and cultural apogee. In his January 1929 inaugural address Mayor McGee reminded the residents that the centennial celebration planned for July "is a proud event in the history of Berlin" and called on every person participating in the event to make it "something that will attract the attention of the whole country to our wonderful city and the success which it has achieved in the past one hundred years." The centennial celebrated Berlin's history and culture and its social and economic achievements, painting a picture of ethnic harmony and economic optimism. Even labor unions, once very active in Berlin earlier in the decade, had all but disappeared by 1929 as the booming economy and resultant prosperity diminished workers' grievances and rendered labor unions increasingly irrelevant.

In 1930 Berlin was New Hampshire's fourth largest city and the largest in the northern two-thirds of the state. It was the first in the State to have electric lights, the power for which was generated by the hydroelectric power station from the Furbish Forest Fiber Mill. The city boasted seven well established banks, numerous profitable businesses, three state-of-the-art theaters with a combined seating capacity of more than 3,500, a symphony orchestra and a band. There was a street railway system connecting Berlin to the town of Gorham eight miles south. Berlin was home to numerous fraternal, civic, athletic, and service organizations representing its multicultural heritage. A contemporary history of Berlin observed that "Berlin in her schools as in her mills is a leader and all over the North American Continent the Berlin school system is known, named, and imitated." Finally, the city's largest employer, Brown Company, had acquired an international reputation through its research facility and its innovative products. As Berlin embarked on its second century, its residents had every reason to be proud of its accomplishments and to anticipate continued prosperity and a bright future.

By early 1930, however, the city had begun to experience some of the aftershocks of the stock market crash in October, 1929. In his 1930 inaugural address Mayor McGee declared that Berlin was "faced with a serious problem, perhaps the most serious that any City Government of Berlin has been confronted with for many years, ... the problem of the unemployed. . .With a large number of men out of work, there is no real prosperity, and surely no good feeling." Because the finances of Berlin were still "in excellent condition" and the cash on hand was "the largest in the history of the City," however, McGee believed that Berlin was in a "position to carry out needed improvements" and weather the economic storm.

In 1931, International Paper Company responded to a labor strike by closing its local mill, leaving many men unemployed with little hope of obtaining other employment. Unlike International Paper Company, Brown Company appeared to have avoided economic disaster in the early 1930s. Unfortunately, by the end of 1931 the international monetary crisis had undermined Brown Company's bonds, sending the company into a deadly financial tailspin. In two short years Berlin had gone from a prosperous, full-employment city to one characterized by massive unemployment and underemployment. The forests were silent during the winter of 1931-1932 because the Brown Company Woods Department could not finance its winter logging operations. Two years later the company was forced into receivership. Residents of the city responded to corruption in local government and massive unemployment by forming a third political party, the Berlin Farmer-Labor Party.

In 1935, under the leadership of newly-elected Mayor Arthur Bergeron, the Farmer-Labor Party began the process of reorganizing city government and acting as a conduit for federal monies sent to aid the ailing Brown Company. The party stayed in power until the early 1940s, when Brown Company again found itself in bankruptcy. This time the Brown family lost its remaining interest in Brown Company, and it was sold to outside investors who had little or no interest in the research and development facility, reducing its staff and finally closing it in 1968. Without the Browns at the helm the pulp and paper mills continued to decline under a series of out-of-state corporate owners, until the last owner, Fraser Paper, finally closed the Berlin pulp mill in 2006, but continues to operate the paper making plant in Gorham.

In 1896 Edward C. Niles had observed that "the present conditions and prospects" for the future of Berlin, resided in the leaders of the "present-day." He further opined that "whatever of good or evil, of disaster or prosperity may befall this metropolis of the back-woods will be due to the industry and sagacity or to the negligence and incompetence of those who to-day are determining the lines along which the development of its natural resources ...shall be carried on." Berlin is again at a turning point, and the Androscoggin River is still shaping and informing its future.

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UPDATE: In May 2011, the Gorham Paper Mill formerly owned by Fraser Papesr was acquired by Lynn Tilton and renamed Gorham Paper and Tissue LLC. Please visit their website for more information: <http://www.gorhampt.com> (pel 7/2012)